

Compton (Morris House)  
Meadowbrook Avenue  
Philadelphia (Chestnut Hill)  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1682

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PA,  
51- GERM,  
188 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

COMPTON  
(Morris House)

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- Location: Meadowbrook Avenue, Philadelphia (Chestnut Hill),  
Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.
- Present Use: The house was demolished in 1968. The grounds currently  
serve as an arboretum known as the Morris Arboretum, which is  
administered by the University of Pennsylvania. This report  
was written in 1964, four years before the demolition.
- Significance: Compton was a summer home of the Morris family, who have long  
been associated with the Philadelphia society. The building,  
designed by the well-known architect, Theophilus Parsons  
Chandler, Jr., is a late 19th century eclectic stone  
structure and is particularly noted for its elaborate  
interior.

### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

#### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1887-88.
2. Architect: Theophilus Parsons Chandler, Jr. (1845-1928).

#### B. Historical Context: The original owners of Compton were Lydia and John Thompson Morris. In 1932, upon Lydia Morris' death, the estate was given to the University of Pennsylvania for use as an educational and research institution.

John T. Morris and his sister Lydia were the son and daughter of  
Isaac P. Morris who was the son of Isaac Wistar Morris and the  
grandson of Samuel B. Morris, Captain of that elite organization of  
the Revolutionary War fame, the Philadelphia Troop of Light Horse.  
The Morris family was long connected with the iron industry and Isaac  
Morris headed the I. P. Morris Company, manufacturers of machinery  
until that firm was amalgamated with Cramp Shipyards in 1891.

The Morris' lived at 826 Pine Street in Philadelphia and in 1887-88  
built Compton, in the suburb of Chestnut Hill, as a summer home.  
Their former summer residence had been Cedar Grove, the old family  
homestead in Frankford. In later years Miss Morris presented Cedar  
Grove to the city of Philadelphia and had the building moved to  
Fairmount Park where it now stands.

From the very beginning the abiding interest of Mr. and Miss Morris  
in horticulture led them to establish and maintain an arboretum of  
unsurpassed interest and beauty. They traveled widely throughout the  
world bringing back seeds and specimens of exotic trees and shrubs to  
add to the native collections which they had assembled here. The  
original planning and landscaping were done under Mr. Morris' personal  
direction and after his death Miss Morris continued the development

of the grounds in the same tradition. It was she, indeed, who added two features which are much admired and enjoyed today--the Rose Garden and the Rock Wall Garden.

John Morris died in 1915. Nine years later Lydia Morris came to Compton to live the year around, and it was here that she died in 1932. In her will she provided that the estate be continued as an arboretum under the care and direction of the Botany Department of the University of Pennsylvania.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A good example of an affluent suburban mansion of the late nineteenth century. Elaborate interior decoration.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two and a half stories on a raised basement; irregular dimensions (approximately 75' x 65') and bays.
2. Foundations: Coursed cyclopean-rusticated granite, medium grey in color.
3. Walls: Coursed cyclopean-rusticated granite, medium grey in color. Upper parts of the walls have projecting carved animal head drains.
4. Structural system, framing: Stone and wood framing.
5. Porches: Projecting, gabled, angled entrance porch. Other porches are framed; board floors; simple square posts; exposed rafters. Very little decorative work.
6. Chimneys: Two stone chimneys; quite plain. Slightly rounded corners.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Double doors are set in a stone arch frame; simple except for a handsome stained glass window in upper half of doors.
  - b. Windows and shutters: Windows are one-over-one light double-hung wood sash; plain.

Next floor windows have solid board shutters. Second story windows have simple labels. The windows in the battlemented tower have segmental-arched, arched and bay windows. The fourth floor has dormer windows on each side with double-hung wood sash and set with small muntins.

8. Roof: Hipped, gable and apsidal roofs with Flemish cross gables with terra cotta ridges; one battlemented roof. No cornice is visible.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: There is a first floor large central hallway with an elaborate staircase at the right side. To the left are the three rooms to rear center, center stairs and elevator. To the rear right are the rooms with a circular porch adjoining. The right entrance is a small coatroom section. Second floor rooms open off of large central hallway. Hallways partially open from first to second stories.
2. Stairways: Closed-string oak stairways are three runs and are elaborately decorated. Newels are square with elaborately decorated turns with ball finials. Spiral balusters are fancy turned. The understair is paneled. In the rooms to rear are small square service stairs, also in oak.
3. Flooring: Narrow hardwood floors.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings. Hallways have elaborate decorative panel and soffit designs. Ceilings are beamed. Baseboards are heavy.
5. Doors: Generally, the doors are of oak and have panels and heavy trim. The doors to the middle and rear rooms in the first floor are double sliding doors, also with trim.
6. Decorative features and trim: The most important decorative features of the house are the magnificent fireplaces, each individually designed. They have highly elaborate wood carvings, fancy tiles, marbles and noteworthy cast-iron firebacks. The house also has elaborately decorated fancy woodwork and stained glass windows.
7. Hardware: The front door has handsome fancy door plates and an elaborate front grill over the stained glass window.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: Present heating system was not recorded at the time of the survey.

b. Lighting: Lighting is electric. There are many very handsome custom-designed lighting fixtures throughout the house. An iron chandelier hangs from the second story hall over the stairs.

c. Elevator: There is an elevator shaft in the house.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house sits on edge of a steep hill looking out into Whitemarsh Valley, a breathtaking view. It is set in the center of a large country estate now turned into an arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania. Large servant and stable outbuildings are down the hill. Rich gardens, trees and shrubs surround the estate.

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